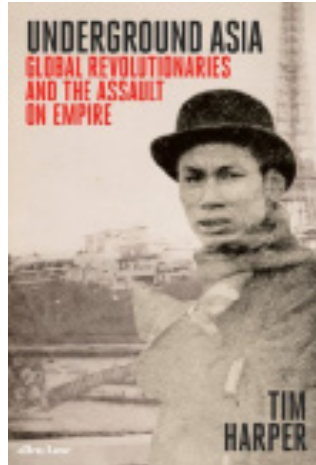


Book Review

by Lida V. NEDILSKY

Tim Harper, *Underground Asia*.
Cambridge: Harvard University
Press, 2021. 826 pages.
ISBN 978-0674724617



The places are familiar: Hong Kong, Canton and Shanghai; London, Paris, Berlin and Moscow; New York, San Francisco and Palo Alto; Tokyo and Singapore. As the wheel of history revolves, it carries us in our own lifetimes to these same sites. We make personal connections. Whether as people who mobilize, people who witness or people who heal, we are closer than ever to those of *Underground Asia* who made history there a century ago.

Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire is University of Cambridge historian Tim Harper's detailed account of the project to uproot colonialism and transform its liberated people. Mass migrations define the first three decades of the twentieth century, from 1905 until 1927. Due as much to war as to industry, the spread and mix of people dominates this period of world history and the ideas of the day. It takes more than proximity, however, to

set alongside one another characters like businessman Gurdit Singh, journalist Qu Qiubai, trade unionist Henk Sneevliet, young radical Agnes Smedley, shape-shifter Nguyen Ai Quoc or ideologue Ibrahim Tan Malaka. But in Harper's rendering, influential personalities surface and sympathetic individuals find one another.

In the opening pages of *Underground Asia*, Harper lays out the challenge of finding like-minded allies. Here he juxtaposes three maps, each tracing a central figure's physical journey across oceans and continents, with a single map depicting the totality of European territorial claims in South, Southeast and East Asia. Together these four visual guides highlight common stopping points dotting wide stretches of space. Canton and Shanghai, Berlin and Moscow, New York and San Francisco are places for what Harper calls the dark arts of insurgency. Here students learn to organize strike-boycotts, radical orators get a campus audience, or bobbed-hair women detonate bombs. As stopping points, they are likewise associated with the stuff of checkpoints: permission to land, disembarkation, identification papers and a petty bureaucrat's rejection.

Cities are where the British employ sepoys to guard their stake of foreign soil and informers working for the Sûreté, France's international police network (the first of its kind), piece together anyone's back story. London and Paris are the central cities of empire, setting apart on parallel tracks members of the revolutionary underground from India and

Annam. Being underground means the like-minded might never be visible to one another. To make known their names or take for granted the screen of strangers that promises concealment risks police apprehension, deportation or death. And when two members of the underground do chance to meet, brush talk may suffice as unifying script among Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese much as Esperanto –like the pidgin mix of Hindustani, Portuguese and English that merchants and lascars developed a century before— serves as the lingua franca for those avoiding the official languages of empire.

Spectators scatter along these pathways. Christians, in Harper's telling, support others' reform agendas or function as heralds of revolutionary armies. They even serve as convenient caricatures for crafting a false identity. Christianity, similarly, occupies a negative space. Catholic ideals demonstrated by the Jesuit order or Protestant organizations grounded in self-improvement inspire imitation but do not themselves guide action. Harper's association of both believers and church with imperialism and not indigenous religion relegates Christianity to the very edges of his account of a world built on the margins but mustering a critical mass. The Christianity of missionaries and colonial authorities stands in contrast to Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism. These religions stretch across land and sea, too, strung together in the bodies of soldiers and dockworkers, merchants and mariners. Might these be the evangelists of revolution?

That certain agendas come to dominate in this highly fragmented and contested context is a mighty fete. The first two decades of the twentieth century are a time of armament and attrition. Much as colonizers betray their colonial subjects, internationalists vie with nationalists and anarchists vie with communists—not only Bolsheviks and Mensheviks but Trotskyites and Stalinists—with secular ideology as the center of gravity. Revolutionaries fight one another, whether a war of words at a political forum in Moscow or with troops and guns on the field of battle in Wuhan, Canton or Shanghai.

With his fifth and final map and in his most cohesive chapter, entitled “The Long March of the Underground,” Harper aptly describes the Kuomintang’s Northern Expedition of revolutionary China not as the coalescence but the contraction of a movement around a narrowing concept of party. Distinct wings of the KMT and their attendant allies, including Wang Jingwei and by extension the Chinese Communist Party, are cast off as an encumbrance or purged as a rival through a combination of concession, inaction and outright betrayal. Interpreter to chief Comintern agent Mikhail Borodin, Zhang Tailei, fumes, “who are the Kuomintang’s left wing? Chang (sic) Kai-shek is not... There is no left wing” (561). CCP General Secretary Chen Duxiu, in turn, sees safety among “a motley crew of military adventurers and politicians interested in achieving their own private ambitions” minus the KMT (561). The aftermath of the KMT’s power grab is equally vexing, as Chen pointedly

notes, asking “Why should we clamour over it and what kind of agitation should we develop when the aggressors were not the English, but the Chinese?” (587).

What dramatically and devastatingly ends this chapter of the KMT’s relationship with the CCP, the contraction of a movement around a single and streamlined party, stands in stark contrast to twenty-first century popular mobilizations. By replacing the concepts of the proletariat and the masses with the multitude, argue scholars Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their books *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), we mark the normalization of difference and the centrality of culture both of which are necessary if today’s empire is to be upended. We need not choose the dockworker or Islam over the missionary or Christianity. There may very well be room for all of them in this version of history.

Across Asia today, the cities of Hong Kong, Bangkok, Taipei and Yangon chart the reach of the Milk Tea Alliance. Some versions of the map stretch to include Moscow, Minsk and Kyiv. Yes, we have personal knowledge of these distant places once inhabited by members of the underground. But is it not the combination of war and industry in the early 21st Century that makes it possible for us to count among our intimates today the protestors and organizers, casualties and inmates, migrants and exiles of Asia?

Extraordinary for even so intricate a rendering of global history as Tim Harper’s is the author’s treatment of injuries and healing that must follow momentous, transformative

movements. Early in the text he recounts how Winston Churchill (no liberal) accused Anglo-Indian imperialists of undermining the liberties of England itself when they denied Madan Lal Dhingra, an accused assassin, his statement in court. Writing in his book's epilogue, Harper takes care to highlight not only competitive relationships but collaborative expressions. He waits until the final paragraphs of his book to present us with another victim of summary military justice: Tan Malaka. This time, Harper tells the story of resurrection. More than seventy years after his execution at the hands of the Indonesian National Army, Tan Malaka is raised from the anonymity of an unmarked grave. Instead, like the iconic Che Guevara, his image lives on as it graces young Indonesians' t-shirts. Even in death, the bodies of these men—Dhingra and Tan Malaka as much as Guevara—do anything but rest in peace.